

EULOGY FOR ABBOT AIDAN SHEA, O.S.B.

*by Robert W. Truland
Saturday, December 15, 2018
delivered at St. Anselm's Abbey School*

Ithaca, by Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933)

When you start on your journey to Ithaca,
then pray that the road is long,
full of adventure, full of knowledge.
Do not fear the Lestrygonians
and the Cyclopes and the fierce Poseidon.
You will never meet such as these on your path,
if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine
emotion touches your body and your spirit.
You will never meet the Lestrygonians,
the Cyclopes and the fierce Poseidon,
if you do not carry them within your soul,
if your soul does not raise them up before you.

Then pray that the road is long,
that the summer mornings are many,
that you will enter ports seen for the first time
with such pleasure, with such joy!
Stop at Phoenician markets,
and purchase fine merchandise,
mother-of-pearl and corals, amber and ebony,
and pleasurable perfumes of all kinds.
Buy as many pleasurable perfumes as you can;
visit hosts of Egyptian cities,
to learn, and learn from those who have knowledge.

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to anchor at the isle when you are old,
rich with all that you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage;
 without her you would never have taken the road.
 But she has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.
 With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
 you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

Good morning. I'm assuming Jon Meacham is a no-show. When Abbot James asked if I would do Aidan's eulogy, I knew the choices were "yes" and "yes, but..." I chose the latter. Recognizing how many friends Aidan had, I thought it might be more appropriate to let many of you share your thoughts and reminiscences... but here we are. I know I cannot capture the relationships which you each had. It was part of Aidan's genius not to appear to love us all, but in fact to love each of us for what he found in us with very little concern for what he didn't.

Obedience is at the core of Benedictine life. There may be other ways of reaching the ultimate goal, but the Rule of St. Benedict prescribes and proscribes a way of living so complete and detailed there can hardly be the opportunity to veer off the path. Thus it was never easy springing Aidan even for an overnight at our farm, much less for actual trips.

Prayer of St. Benedict

Gracious and Holy Father,
 Please give me: intellect to understand you,
 reason to discern you, diligence to seek you,
 wisdom to find you, a spirit to know you,
 a heart to meditate upon you,
 ears to hear you, eyes to see you,
 a tongue to proclaim you,
 a way of life pleasing to you,
 patience to wait for you and
 perseverance to look for you.

Grant me a perfect end, your holy presence,
 A blessed resurrection and life everlasting.

Amen.

St. Benedict of Nursia

Soon after he married us, we invited Aidan on the first of our adventures together. On the first morning we woke to the refulgent light of the Ionian sea, the very waters sailed by Odysseus as he journeyed towards his home, Ithaca. Our perch was Lawrence Durrell's 'White House' on Corfu. We all know Aidan's perennial and predictable beatific visage, the smile, the sparkling eyes. Now he seemed as though he had succumbed to the wiles of the lotus-eaters – it was too early for the first Campari or ouzo; he was in a childlike ecstasy. All of his literary allusions and illusions were about to unfold before him. Outside our front door our friend Tatty was in ardent negotiations with an itinerant vegetable vendor and the sounds, soon followed by the seductive aromas, arose through the vine-covered pergola of a typical Greek café. Languorous, undemanding days ensued.

At the time we felt blessed that we had happened upon the perfect place. We even thought we would definitely return. But we came to learn that this was just the start of our journey together. In subsequent years it didn't much matter if we were in Tuscany or Umbria, Venice or Verona, Madrid or the Canary Islands. The magic persisted, the magic which is friendship. Everyone here this morning has known the friendship of Aidan and has taken from that what it means to be accepted for who you are, unconditionally and completely.

Aidan was compulsively self-deprecating – part of the charm. The sight of this holy man making his way through an airport terminal towing his suitcase with the wheels turned upwards is but an example of how what we call "the real world" presented challenges. We also came to expect that in any international terminal Aidan would be approached by at least one acquaintance, and in one instance two. The oft-told tales of his misadventures in the military are, I suppose, humorous in their way. You may or may not know about the abuse he suffered therein. I mention it because we are all a consequence of our experiences, and what he was willing to share with me may provide insight to you.

You may or may not know that he was adopted. I mention it again because he did, so I understood that he considered it significant. In my opinion it was not significant in the way he thought. Aidan was destined to be unique and, like prophets in any era, the parents who raised him would have been amazed. If we are lucky, we will know a prodigy. Sometimes I think the Lord cannot resist disrupting the production line, like, you know, Elon Musk. As a child Aidan had scarlet fever, which probably made him frail. And, let's face it, he was a nerd, though a verbal one. Consider the situation of Joseph and Mary, the first surrogate mother. It wouldn't matter exactly how the chromosomes came together; they sired the world's most unusual son. The Buddha – could've been adopted. Joan of Arc, Alexander the Great, Abraham.... in Aidan's modesty he simply didn't accept that he was not destined to be that ordinary son who had a newspaper route and looked for pick-up baseball games after school. It didn't mean his parents didn't love him, although it was pretty clear to Aidan that his father did not. Aidan just had a different destiny.

Aidan wrote much, but he wrote it very small. I would drive Aidan to Virginia on many a Sunday morning to say mass, to give the homily, which always seemed to be written on the back of any envelope. When I asked how he was preserving all of this wisdom, he just shrugged. St. Paul, his namesake, would not have been pleased.

The following is from Aidan's notes written in his teensy tiny handwriting.

my last lecture

identity intellectual, spiritual, emotional

faith

love friendship

study

play

God religion

care of self body

happiness =

acceptance of self

Core Values:

what makes me unique?

be kind

“ are my roles?

“ thoughtful

“ do I alone truly have to offer?

“ honest

“ good

passion

“ modest

curiosity

“ polite

what are my dreams?

“ is my dream?

Be a raging optimist?

Sorting out Aidan's room today, Father Joseph dropped by to see if Aidan might have some surplus birdseed. A quick search produced two unopened bags and one kitty litter tub 2/3 full, which were conveyed to Joseph.

Joseph said that in recent years as he observed Aidan's decline, he still tried to elicit some sort of response rather than just pass by. Typically he would offer the salutation, "How's it going, young man?" (Joseph having the superior claim by five years). Getting no response, he offered his own, "Why would you care, old man?" which should have ended it. But Aidan mustered his Boston-bred manners and said, "I could never be that rude." It pleased Joseph and myself no end to recognize that within days of shedding his soon-to-be superfluous body, he could deliver one last lesson in etiquette. Also, Joseph, if when Aidan and I first met he was twice my age, a 100% difference which has now been cut to 20%, how long would it take to close the gap completely?

Prodigious, omnivorous, small-c catholic and cap-C as well, the volumes in his room ranged from religious tracts to contemporary fiction to poetry, both classic and modern, and although I never unearthed anything from mathematics and the sciences, Aidan was such a convincing listener that he appeared to absorb with rapt attention such abstractions as, and I am going to quote from Dr. Leo Eskin, Class of '76,

Lanza describes some of the basic concepts of quantum physics such as the wave-particle duality and quantum entanglement. He goes on to present the idea that space and time are constructs of the mind and that consciousness creates reality, which has quantum support. The idea that we are all connected and that everything is impermanent are also quantum concepts as well as pillars of the yogic culture, and those ideas seemed to interest [Aidan], especially as it implies the possibility of some form of connectedness both while we are alive and after we pass away.

Yes, Leo, Rowena will vouch for it.

From Cavafy to Eliot to Kooser to Mary Oliver to Rumi to Whitman to Dickey... Aidan's capacity to appreciate the broadest range of poets was phenomenal. Following are selections, bits and pieces from Aidan's last library which was considerably reduced from what he had when he was Abbot.

Walt Whitman / *Leaves of Grass* / *Great are the Myths*

Youth, large, lusty, loving – Youth, full of grace, force,
fascination!

Do you know that Old Age may come after you, with equal
grace, force, fascination?

Day, full-blown and splendid – Day of the immense sun,
action, ambition, laughter,

The Night follows close, with millions of suns, and sleep,
and restoring darkness.

Wealth, with the flush hand, fine clothes, hospitality;

But then the Soul's wealth, which is candor, knowledge, pride, enfolding love.

2...

Great is the quality of Truth in man;

The quality of truth in man supports itself through all
changes,

It is inevitably in the man – he and it are in love, and
never leave each other.

3...

Great is Language – it is the mightiest of the sciences,

It is the fullness, color, form, diversity of the earth and
of men and women, and of all qualities and processes;

It is greater than wealth – it is greater than buildings, ships,
religions, paintings, music.

T.S. Eliot / *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair –

[They will say, “How his hair is growing thin!”]

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin –

[They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”]

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, know them all:
 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
 I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall
 Beneath the music from a farther room.
 So how should I presume?...

I grow old... I grow old...
 I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

T.S. Eliot / *Ariel Poems* / *Journey of the Magi*

‘A cold coming we had of it.
 Just the worst time of the year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.’
 And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
 Lying down in the melted snow.
 There were times we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
 Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
 And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches,
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying
 That this was all folly.

T.S. Eliot / *A Song for Simeon*

Grant Israel's consolation
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow.

According to thy word,
They shall praise Thee and suffer in every generation
With glory and derision.
Light upon light, mounting the saints' stair.
Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer,
Not for me the ultimate vision.
Grant me thy peace.
(And a sword shall pierce thy heart,
Thine also.)
I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me.
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.
Let thy servant depart,
Having seen thy salvation.

Stephen Dunn / *The Arm*

A doll's pink, broken-off arm
was floating in a pond
a man had come to with his dog.
The arm had no sad child nearby
to say it was hers, no parent to rescue it
with a stick or branch.

And this pleased the man to whom
absence always felt like opportunity.
He imagined a girl furious
at her younger sister, taking it out on her
one limb at a time.

Yet the sun was glancing off
the arm's little pink fingers,
and the pond's heart-shaped lily pads
seemed to accentuate an oddness,
which he thought beautiful.

When he and the dog looked for
the doll's body but couldn't find it,
a different image came to him,

of a father who hated the fact
 that his son liked dolls.
 What was floating there
 was a punishment that didn't work,
 for the boy had come to love
 his one-armed doll even more.
 Once again the man was struck
 by how much misery
 the human spirit can absorb.

His dog wanted to move on,
 enough of this already.
 But the man was creating little waves
 with his hands, and the arm, this thing
 his wife was sure to question,
 was slowly bobbing toward him.

So let us return to the beginning. I entered Priory School in the fall of 1956 as a 2nd form student, having completed remedial algebra and Latin at St. Gregory's in York Harbor, Maine. The following year Aidan was clothed as a novice and it's probable he taught me 3rd form Latin. Aidan I were likely introduced by John Barrett, my English teacher. For the next five years I spent most of my free time in the company of Aidan, John, and the other John who taught history, as well as a handful of upperclassmen who were pretty artsy, had transportation and could buy beer (no one was called Squee). I also saw a fair amount of Fr. Stephen Reid, who put me in all his plays – he needed my voice. By the time 6th form rolled around, I had Aidan for Latin. Almost immediately I sort of shut down because I didn't like the author – probably Ovid. So Aidan being Aidan, he put me on to Juvenal - acerbic, cynical, incorruptible, sarcastic – a man after my own tastes.

That year Aidan made his final vows.

For the next 60 years Aidan's radiance permeated my family and all who came within his orbit. All friends and guests sought him out. An example is our friend and local veterinarian, Dr. Peter Eeg, who observed that, "Aidan was the first religious person I had met that placed our four-footed companions at a higher level in the realm of support to our species." I believe Aidan's first connection to a quadruped was with a short-haired chihuahua named Milo who, for a fortnight each summer in Bermuda, never left his side, defended the verandah sofa each morning, shared the morning cappuccinos, and greeted him effusively on each visit to the farm. Apologies to the laundry which had to remove all those little white hairs from all those black habits. And on the day when Aidan began to drift soulward, Milo on the farm suddenly began a vigil, staring into space, unresponsive to us for more than day, until he knew Aidan's journey was done.

To conclude: for me, Aidan, you will never be that vestigial body you were ready, if not eager, to shed; but you always be that luminous being tasting your first cappuccino, Campari, Fortaleza Cooler, or Queens Park Swizzle at Trader Vic's, or laughing uproariously at your favorite movie with Olivia, *Beverly Hills Cop!* Yes, I may have led you astray on occasion (I don't think you were a great candidate for the Trappists) but then I really needed to pass 6th form Latin. *Ave atque vale*, my friend. Do not go to rest in peace – what a waste! I want to know your spirit lives on in all of us. I want to talk to you when email is a thing of the past. I want to feel that everyone you have touched carries with them their own unique version of your spirit to be shared, discussed, debated – in the earliest traditions of our church: for surely those who have walked in the sandaled footsteps of our Savior must live on in our daily lives forever. We were blessed - let us not squander that blessing.

From my wife Mary, this haiku:

Narrow path toward the cemetery
generations of abbots
fallen camellias

And from our daughter Olivia:

12. This is my commandment, that you love one
another as I have loved you. 13. Greater love has
no one than this, than to lay down one's life for
his friends. John 15: 12-13

And from Aidan's favorites:

Robert Morgan / Living Tree

It's said they planted trees by graves
to soak up spirits of the dead
through roots into the growing wood.
The favorite in the burial yards
I knew was common juniper.
One could do worse than pass into
such a species. I like to think
that when I'm gone the chemicals
and yes the spirit that was me
might be searched out by subtle roots
and raised with sap through capillaries

into an upright, fragrant trunk,
 and aromatic twigs and bark,
 through needles bright as hoarfrost to
 the sunlight for a century
 or more, in wood repelling rot
 and standing tall with monuments
 and statues there on the far hill,
 erect as truth, a testimony,
 in ground that's dignified by loss,
 around a melancholy tree
 that's pointing toward infinity.

Mary Oliver / Mindful

Every day
 I see or hear
 something
 that more or less

kills me
 with delight,
 that leaves me
 like a needle

in the haystack
 of light.
 It was what I was born for –
 to look, to listen,

to lose myself
 inside this soft world –
 to instruct myself
 over and over

in joy,
 and acclamation.
 Nor am I talking
 about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
 the very extravagant -
 but of the ordinary,
 the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.
 Oh, good scholar,
 I say to myself,
 how can you help

but grow wise
 with such teachings
 as these –
 the untrimmable light

of the world,
 the ocean's shine,
 the prayers that are made
 out of grass?

Robert Bly / Poem of the Day: Wanting Sumptuous Heavens

No one grumbles among the oyster clans
 And lobsters play their bone guitars all summer.
 Only we, with our opposable thumbs, want
 Heaven to be, and God to come, again.
 There is no end to our grumbling; we want
 Comfortable earth and sumptuous Heaven.
 But the heron standing on one leg in the bog
 Drinks his dark rum all day, and is content.

Norman Fischer

Meditation is when you sit down and do nothing.

Poetry is when you sit down and do something.

G. E. Patterson / The Saint's First Wife Said

I woke to your face not looking at me
 but at the bird that settled on your wrist
 lured by food. Its trust, for once, was rewarded.
 You offered the bird everything you had.

I remember. That is how it began
 with us: You held out your hand; I took it.

ABBOT AIDAN SHEA: RETIREMENT SPEECH

As you know, I am approaching my 50th year as a monk. I am also ending my 46th year as a teacher, and I ended my term as Abbot on the 14th of January, and I'm continuing as Abbot until the 7th of June. And on the 8th, Prior Simon, a monk from the Belmont Monastery in England, will come to be superior. I was brought up in a marinade of "should" and "ought," and it held me in good stead, but it also didn't seriously complicate my life. When I was young I had the habit of not reading letters until I had time to read them. I reasoned that if someone took the time to write me a letter, I'm going to read it as thoughtfully as I can. Well, I once received a letter from the United States government. I hadn't opened it; consequently, I didn't appear on the day I was supposed to appear. The two military police went to my mother's home. She wouldn't let them into her home; she made them sit on a porch. She had no hearing at that point, and gave them 3x5 cards on which to write what they wanted. So they asked her some questions. Some she answered; some she didn't. For instance, where was I—she wouldn't tell them. One of them convincingly wrote that if she didn't tell them, I would be in more trouble than I already am. So she relented. The next day they were at my door, and the following day I was in the Army. And because Yahweh wasn't really very pleased with me, I wasn't sent north, where one would expect someone from New England to go, but I was sent south, to the basic training unit of the 82nd airborne infantry division. It was a course in reality therapy for me.

Early on in my fourteen weeks there, there was a surprise inspection. One of the ta-ta-ta-ta woke us up at half past three in the morning, so we all fell out, as it was styled, and I was one of the two chosen in my barracks to be inspected. I had learned already that one didn't look the officer in the eye; one simply looked steadily at something, so that's what I was doing. I evidently wasn't paying quite enough attention so he asked me if I knew the difference between this weapon and a woman, and I said, "Indeed I do." It was a serious mistake to use, "indeed." It really upset him, so to speak. So he asked me, in very clear Chaucerian English, if I would pull in my stomach, push out my chest, pull in my chin, and just snap the weapon to me. So I pulled in, pushed out, pulled in—whsssh!—and my gun fell apart in the sand of South Carolina. And why did it fall apart? Because each night before one went to bed, one had to clean whatever weapon one was working with. In fact, one had to sleep with the weapon except for the bazooka

and machine gun. Well, I had some odds and ends by the time I finished cleaning this, and I didn't know what to do with them, so I stuck them in my pocket. Among the treasures in my pocket was something about this long. It's called a "trigger housing pin." Anyone would know that a trigger housing pin has to go someplace near the trigger, but I didn't make that leap in my mind, so my gun fell apart, I got two more weeks of KP, and had the most humiliating experience up to that point in my life. But I've thought about it a lot, and I wondered analogically, is there a trigger housing pin, so to speak, that I need to attend to? And of course there is. The thing that holds my life together, ultimately, is consciousness, and it's often what I have stuck in my pocket, so to speak. And so I learned something extremely valuable from that.

So from there I went from the marinade of "should" and "ought" to "You will," and that was a very definite world. Eventually I left the military. I was happy to leave, and they were happy to have me leave, and I entered the monastery. I came at 5:30—I mean, I was supposed to be here at 5:30—I arrived at 5:20. I rang the bell of the old monastery, the monastery I like to call St Benedict's, and Brother Francis answered. He didn't say anything; he just looked at me. So I told him who I was and why I was there, and he said, "I'll see what we can do," and shut the door. Well, at 7:00 I was still outside. I was supposed to be there at 5:30. Since then, I have been discovering what the monks and the monastery, and the school, the faculty, the staff, the students, their families, the Board of Advisors, the oblates, benefactors, friends of the monastery, what they have effected within me. I have been discovering what God can do, what the Gospel can do, what the Rule of Benedict can do. I have discovered what generosity and friendship mean, what truthfulness and the Presence that Abides mean, what love and forgiveness mean, what the body of Christ means, what the community of saints means.

What have I learned? What do I need to stay conscious of? Well, I've learned to cherish St. Benedict. St. Benedict looked at the human heart. He sought, or he seeks, within me, willingness, sincerity, truthfulness, humility, obedience, a love of prayer, a love of the brethren, fidelity. He hopes, prays, that I will be alive to God, and alive to those whom God brings into my life. From the school of the Lord's service, I've learned that a good school, whether it's a monastery, or a school attached to a monastery, like the Abbey School, that those two schools have certain marks. I have to learn how to concentrate, to center on God, to center on myself, and not to get myself out of the way so that I can center on others, and center academically. I have to learn to communicate, not only to be honest about what I think, what I feel, but also to be silent, and listen. The school has to help its students to develop critical skills, to take an evaluative stance toward life. A good school will help one to become compassionate. And finally, I think a good school helps one to work to enable others to perceive themselves as God's best gift to the self.

From the monks, from the oblates, from the parent community, from students, from the Board of advisors, benefactors, the faculty and staff, from my friends, I've learned many, many things. I'll just mention one: the absolute treasure that is obedience to the unenforceable. No one can force, demand, the presence, thanksgiving, generosity, kindness, communion, love, concern.

One can't demand any of those non-molecular forces that make life an adventure, and a joy, and that draw one slowly, or not so slowly, closer and closer to God. Were it not for the generosity from you, we wouldn't be sitting where we're sitting. Were it not for your generosity, kindness, we wouldn't have this lovely campus we have. So, obedience to the unenforceable.

From the students I've learned many things—some I wanted to know, some I really didn't. I think mostly I've learned how important it is to see them. To see them not as somehow an extension of me, or an extension of the ideal student in whatever discipline. I read about a year ago from a French philosopher: “A sense of responsibility comes not from within, but from the face that looks at you.” The students taught me that.

The very first term I taught, I was teaching sixth formers a course in Tacitus, and I was talking—whatever it was I was talking about, I don't know; but I know one of them—I finally picked it up out of the corner of my eye, and he said to me, “Brother Aidan, we're over here.” In other words, I was talking intently about whatever and the students were here; I wasn't looking at them, I wasn't seeing them. So, to see them, to respect them, look at them, see them as God's best gift to themselves, ultimately. But to see, look at.

I've also learned from them how much they cherish the very simple “I don't know.” They ask a question, one doesn't know the answer: “I don't know. I'll find out—but I don't know.” They treasure that. I've also learned to treasure their attention. I've learned too how important it is to know what one is doing, and to believe what one is doing, and to pick up the allergic reaction many students have, which is very healthy, to pretense.

And finally I think I've learned from them, among others, the mystery of the word “peace.” As I understand it, peace means that I'm reconciled to myself because I am the self God gave me; I'm reconciled to you, because you are the self God gave you; I'm reconciled to this world, because it's God's world, and I'm reconciled to God. In other words, we've bonded with one another, and maintaining bonds is one definition of love. So.

Finally just let me say that one of the students years ago gave me a carefully calligraphed snippet from *The Once and Future King* that he had labored through with me in the first form—it was the fifth form when he gave it to me—and it reads “Eternally—” (it's God talking to man in the creation era of *The Once and Future King*): “Man, you are eternally undeveloped, ever potential in my sight, able to know some of my sorrows, able to know some of my joys.”

I think I have learned finally what that means. I think St. Benedict perhaps says it a bit more concisely, because he says that we are learners for as long as we live, and we are beginners. So if it's true that the best teacher lodges an intent not in the mind but in the heart, I am deeply thankful, profoundly thankful, for the intent that you and all of you have lodged in my heart as well as in my head, and profoundly thankful to have you as my teachers, as well as my brothers and sisters, and as the ones who are leading me, however slowly, leading me back to God.